

**FINDINGS:** Significant religious freedom problems and official harassment of religious adherents persist in Turkmenistan despite steps taken by Turkmen President Berdimuhamedov since 2007 to reduce certain aspects of the repressive measures that existed under the country's former president. The country's laws, policies, and practices continue to violate international human rights norms, including on freedom of religion or belief. Police raids and other harassment of registered and unregistered religious groups continue more than three years after the death of longtime dictator Saparmurat Niyazov. The repressive 2003 religion law remains in force, causing major difficulties for religious groups to legally function.

In light of these persistent and severe problems, and until systemic human rights reforms are implemented, USCIRF continues to recommend in 2010 that the U.S. government designate Turkmenistan as a "country of particular concern," or CPC. The Commission has recommended the CPC designation for Turkmenistan since 2000, but the State Department has never followed this recommendation.

Under the late President Saparmurat Niyazov, who died in December 2006, Turkmenistan was among the world's most repressive and isolated states. Virtually no independent public activity was permitted and Niyazov maintained a vast cult of personality. Today, despite decreased emphasis, the Turkmen government still promotes the former president's personality cult through the *Ruhnama* (Niyazov's book of "spiritual thoughts") as a mandatory feature of public education. Turkmen law does not allow a civilian alternative to military service, and five Jehovah's Witnesses have been imprisoned for conscientious objection to military service. Although the new president has taken a few positive steps, including the 2007 release of the country's former chief mufti, systemic legal reforms directly related to religious freedom and other human rights have not been made.

**PRIORITY RECOMMENDATIONS:** The United States should appoint an ambassador to Turkmenistan as soon as possible, in part because previous U.S. ambassadors have played a key role in addressing that country's human rights issues. For four years, the United States has not been represented in this strategically important country by a fully accredited ambassador. The United States needs to increase exchange programs as well as broadcasts to Turkmenistan to attempt to overcome decades of isolation which have created a threatening cultural vacuum. The United States should also establish regular bilateral meetings with the

Turkmen government on human rights and religious freedom, discuss ways Turkmenistan can implement laws and practices to comply with international human rights standards, and establish a regular reporting mechanism on these issues. In the absence of any measurable improvements in the human rights sphere by the Turkmen government, the United States should express its concern at appropriate international fora, including the United Nations and the OSCE. The United States should also consider whether relevant aspects of the human rights activities of the OSCE Center in Ashgabat can be replicated in OSCE states, including those of Central Asia. Additional recommendations for U.S. policy towards Turkmenistan can be found in the 2010 Annual Report chapter on Turkmenistan and by following this link:

<http://www.uscifr.gov/images/ar2010/turkmenistan2010.pdf>